

How Did We Get to Here from There? by nyctanthes

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Byers Family (mentioned), Jonathan Byers, Murray Bauman (mentioned), Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington (Mentioned)

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-03-04

Updated: 2018-03-04

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:16:41

Rating: Mature

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,154

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Nancy tries not to think too much about her plan, whether it'll work and why she's dragging Jonathan into it. The answers are, respectively, *it has to* and *because*.

Jonathan doesn't give Nancy a hard time about her "plan." In reality, he should question her more. Because it kind of sucks. Well, it's not that it sucks, so much as it's totally dependent on a lot of people they know nothing about acting in exactly a certain way. Sure, the Demogorgon had been way more likely to kill them than the folks at Hawkins Lab are. That also made it easier to predict.

How Did We Get to Here from There?

Author's Note:

Treading well-worn ground here, but hopefully bringing something new to it. Hope you enjoy.

Nancy's more than a little startled when Jonathan swoops in and kisses her. But it's so much better than she imagined. She wants him to do it again. In case he gets the wrong idea, she leans in and kisses him back. Two, three, five times. She doesn't want him to stop.

Even as she laces her fingers through his hair, even as he wraps one arm tightly across her shoulders and uses the other to pull her flush against him, there's still too much space between them. Jonathan lift walks her into the bedroom and Nancy slams the door behind him and she's hot, so hot - starting low in her belly, spreading up to her face and down to her toes.

Jonathan's skimming his hands over her nightgown - up and down, brushing her breasts, friction on her nipples - but Nancy can't feel enough through its thickness. She growls with frustration, tears away from him to yank it off. After the briefest hesitation he pulls off his shirt.

Moving away from each other breaks the momentum.

What now?

His eyes move hotly, nervously over her and Nancy takes a few seconds to look at him, really look at him. At his cut glass cheekbones and deep set eyes and hair that for months she's resisted brushing out of his face; at his surprisingly broad, muscled shoulders that taper to a lean, lean waist and stomach; his narrow, skinny boy hips that she wants to rest a palm on either side of; his hands that hang loosely by his sides, clenching and unclenching, like he's trying to stop himself from crossing them over his chest. She looks at the distinct tent in his flannel pajama pants.

Nancy watches a little furrow form between Jonathan's eyebrows,

sees his lips part.

She doesn't want him to think. She doesn't want him to speak.

She closes the gap between them. Slips her hand inside his pants, skims it along the length of his dick. Wraps her hand firmly around it and slides up, then down. His hips jerk once, then twice. He presses his forehead against hers and groans softly. *Nancy Nancy.*

Her back is to the bed. She reconsiders her initial idea to fall onto it and bring Jonathan with her. She has him in the palm of her hand (*ha*) and it feels right.

Bed? she murmurs, and he sighs his assent. She turns him around, backs him up to the edge and gives him a gentle shove. He's expecting it but is ever obliging, flopping onto his elbows, looking at her (with those eyes) through his hair. He bites his lip and there's a responding pulse low, deep down.

Nancy crawls onto the bed (onto Jonathan) and straddles him, lowers slowly to his lap. Now she can feel him, only a scrap of cotton between them, and the look on Jonathan's face tells her she can do no wrong. She gives an experimental press and swivel. He groans again and falls back; kneads her thighs, her hips, her ass.

He looks good enough to eat.

She's on the pill, of course, has been for months, but still asks:

Condom?

His eyes pop open. He shakes his head.

Have you done...?

He rolls his eyes.

You've seen the mobs after me? I've been saving myself, though.

She smirks and kisses him. Demonstrates, with qualified success, that he shouldn't be so enthusiastic with his tongue. Rocks back and forth against him because she can't stop herself. Slowly, slowly, reminding

herself not to rush - *this is his first time* - she brushes fingertips, presses lips along his neck and shoulders, down his chest and stomach. His hands move lightly all over, exploring, before tangling in her hair – but softly, not tugging and demanding.

They're too far down the mattress. *Scoot up a little?* He responds with an alacrity that makes her laugh, that makes her want to kiss him, the spot where his ribs end and his stomach begins, and she does. She kneels between his legs, and his hands drop away. Nancy can feel him sitting up a little, looking at her. It doesn't come naturally, but she forces herself to look back at him, just for a moment.

Nancy eases off his pants and gives his dick a few strokes with her hand (noting the differences, the similarities), followed by some *hello there* licks. She bites his hip bones, drops open mouthed kisses along the inside of his thighs. She slips him into her mouth and starts to (slowly, slowly) move up and down the length of him, and for a moment he stops breathing.

He exhales. Sighs *Nancy* and rests his hands oh so gently on her shoulders. She hums against him, but his legs are stiff on either side of her. After a minute of this she takes her mouth off him.

Jonathan, it's ok. I won't break.

He didn't have a plan past *don't talk, just kiss*. But she's making these breathy little sounds, and his next thought is *more*. Like she hears him, they're suddenly in Murray's guest room and she's standing in front of him, basically naked.

He looks at her – slight and perfect and confident; looking back at him – and he's pretty sure he's home, in bed, having a spectacular wet dream. He's absolutely sure he has no idea what to do next.

But that's not a problem, because Nancy knows what to do. And he's happy to follow her lead.

He does finally relax (all these noises coming from him). At the end he's jerking so wildly he wants to apologize. He tries to pull her off him at the last second, but she swats his hands away.

Nancy crawls slowly back towards him, drops more kisses. She snuggles up to him and murmurs *that was nice*.

Jonathan bites back the urge to say *thank you*. Decides a kiss is a better response.

He can taste himself on her, smell a musky, *I've been inside a windowless, poorly ventilated fortress for fourteen hours* scent wafting from under her arms. It gets his dick twitching. Again. Suddenly, he's full of ideas. He wants to flip her on her back, hold her arms over her head while he licks her collarbones and nibbles her ears. He wants to dip his fingers (his tongue) into her wetness, push into her while she chants *JonathanJonathanJonathan*, while she begs *pleasedon'tstoppleasedon'tstop*.

And she's looking at him, smiling, like she knows what he's thinking. He blushes, can't stop his eyes from darting away.

She rests her head on his shoulder, whispers in his ear:

What should we do next?

Mike is in the basement. He mopes in his sagging, makeshift tent, whisper-cries into his walkie-talkie *Eleven are you there? Eleven? Eleven!*

Nancy is in her pink and blue aerie. She counts backwards from a hundred. Lies on her left side. Lies on her stomach. Lies on her right side. Lies on her back. Orders herself to relax, just breathe: in for four, out for eight; in for six, out for twelve. Promises herself she will not look at her bedside clock. Notices she's still awake at 1:27, at 2:55, at 3:12, at 4:36, at 5:15.

She rests under her comforter and tries not to think about Barb's parents still putting up missing posters for her. Tries not to think about her *Gone! Gone!* and what that looks like. Tries (and absolutely, completely fails) not to think about *Go home, Barb* and the last expression Barb saw on her best friend's face: Nancy looking down at her from on high - faintly disgusted at her clinging, her refusal to get it, her inability to see that Nancy wants this, wants *Steve* - then turning and walking away.

When she arrives at this part of her nighttime rondelay Nancy digs her nails as hard as she can into her forearms. Or slaps herself across the cheek. Or doesn't let herself fall asleep for the rest of the night, not even for a few minutes.

Some nights she's too exhausted to flagellate herself, to even try to fall asleep, and that's when she finds her mind drifting to Jonathan Byers. She thinks about him crouching in the woods, watching her undress, taking pictures of her. About those looks he'd snuck when they were monster hunting - like he wanted to say something to her, do something to her, but didn't know what. Or how. She thinks about the way he'd just snapped and let loose on Steve in the alley, then turned mild as a kitten at the police station, when they were on their own. Before Chief Hopper and his mom showed and got his back up again.

She told Mike *it's not like that*, then starts to think maybe it is like that. She wonders how Jonathan would react if she kissed him. What he'd do if she asked him to comfort her, crawl into bed with her; get under the covers this time and *let me forget, just for a while*. He'd look at her so helplessly, so worshipfully from behind those bangs. He'd tremble and whisper *Nancy, Nancy* and be so happy to hold her. Sometimes, she lets him carefully unbutton each button of her pajama top and trail delicate kisses down her spine. It all happens - slow movements, soft sighs - through a gauzy, peach filter.

She promises herself more than once, as she dozes off for a blessed few minutes, that she will engineer this in the morning. She's Nancy Wheeler after all: monster hunter with a plan, ready and willing to storm the castle. Suburban girl no longer condemned to the *cul-de-sac*; eyes wide open to the world of possibilities. She's gone toe-to-toe with a Demogorgon and (almost) killed it. How hard could it be to

seduce a high school boy who (she's 90% positive) already likes her?

In the morning, Nancy runs up against the limits of her imagination. It's not like she ever sees Jonathan. She hears he's picked up all his assignments and won't be back in school until January. Should she take one of her mom's casseroles from the freezer and drop by his house? Hang around the parking lot of the diner where he works and bump into him as he's leaving? Call him on the phone to say hi? *Hey, I know Will probably has serious PTSD – from almost dying and all that. I know you've been taking care of him and earning extra cash to rebuild your totally wrecked house. But I'm feeling bad that you got your brother back while I didn't get Barb back. Want to snuggle? Maybe mess around a little?*

Then there's the quiet part of her that asks, *What happens if he says yes? Are you two going to start dating? You're ready to let Jonathan Byers be your boyfriend?*

By Christmas, she's ready to stop thinking. About the Demogorgon, about Barb, about Jonathan. None of them are around anymore.

Steve, though, is.

Steve is always there, waiting and hopeful, with no family or financial responsibilities to keep him away. Desperate to make it *Right again, like it was before. But better, because before I was an asshole – I see that now – but I've changed.* And Nancy does care for him, does miss him. Is she going to throw that away for what's probably a trauma induced, heat of battle attraction to someone she didn't know until a couple of weeks ago? Still doesn't know.

Nancy tucks into a little box labelled "1983" her insomnia, her Barb recriminations, her Jonathan Byers Harlequin fantasies. (Because that's what they are if she's being honest with herself. She tries to be, now.) It's almost a new year. She's ready for life to go back to normal.

For years now, Jonathan's nighttime routine has consisted of collapsing into bed and almost immediately falling asleep. Between school and work and Will and mom and keeping the house from falling apart, literally and figuratively - all while trying to stay calm and even-tempered so as not to upset the delicate balance that is the Byers' version of normality - he's got about ten minutes every day when he's not moving.

When he gets the chance to tune out, he takes it. Even when Will was *lost in an alternate dimension and about to die*, if not already dead; even when he was *lying next to Nancy Wheeler in her bed after pulling her out of a fucking tree trunk* he managed a few hours of sleep.

He wonders, occasionally, if he compartmentalizes a bit more than is healthy. Then he pushes the thought aside.

The winter sucked. God, did it suck. There was the excitement of bringing Will home, getting him back on his feet, doing Christmas and New Year's. Come January, though, he and mom were left with long, dreary winter nights and the inescapable realization that the Will they got back was not the Will who disappeared. Will's openness and big heart had been taken by the Upside Down – exchanged for bland, curtained eyes; frustrating check-ups at Hawkins Lab; inexplicable nightmares and visions.

Jonathan's not much for conversation, but he could always talk to Will. Since they got him back he can't even do that. Sometimes they're in his room - sifting through records, putting together a mix tape - and he looks over and realizes Will's not here. His stomach somersaults at the thought of where he might be. He doesn't ask. Just fiddles with the stereo, gently bumping his shoulder as he reaches past him to adjust the volume or change the song. (Jonathan takes a mental note: less Cure, more T. Rex.)

For a few months, though, since the spring, Will's been a little....better. The weight is still there. He's still...off. But it seems like he's trying now, trying to get back to himself and not just faking

it for their sakes. Which is more than before.

Mom, on the other hand, is holding up way more than he expected, than he let himself hope for. She is less frantic, less anxious. She is focused and determined.

To be fair, she's always been focused and determined; it's not like the first time he saw this side of her was when their house turned into ground zero for an inter-dimensional monster. She's had no choice. Years later they're still dealing with the blowback from dad's (long prayed for) absence: with the unexpected expenses - car repairs, a dead furnace, a couple of cavities - that precipitate hard decisions; with the good citizens of the white bread wonderland that is Hawkins, Indiana who take such malicious pleasure from her struggles, who seemingly want her to fail.

But maintaining in the face of this unrelenting stress has been hard on her. She's never been good at budgeting for the emotional toll their precarious existence regularly, inexorably, demands. Until recently, she's let him make that payment.

Jonathan knows he has Bob to thank, though he never will, for much of mom's newfound steadiness, for relieving some of the years long pressure he's been under. She's calmer than she's been in ages, maybe for as long as Jonathan can remember.

Which means he has a little less to do around the house. Which means he doesn't always collapse into sleep as his head hits his pillow. Which means - lying in bed, brain buzzing after coming home from a late shift at the diner or finishing up homework or extricating himself from a marathon Atari session with Will - he's awake for long enough to let his mind wander over to Nancy.

When he says his mind, he's in fact talking about his dick.

It's not like before the spring, before what he's come to think of as the new normal, he didn't masturbate. He's sixteen, after all. He's a virgin, not a monk. Back then, his fantasies tended to be on the generic side, slightly out of focus. Thinking about a girl from Hawkins? God no.

But Nancy...When he thinks about Nancy his brain fizzes and body prickles in ways he doesn't recognize. There were moments when they were monster hunting - before Steve came charging in (before Steve saved their asses) - when he thought there might be something between them. For a moment here and a moment there Nancy's expression was unguarded, soft and open. Then she'd look away. (Why was she always looking away?) When she turned back she was different: neutral, controlled, distant. Focused. On saving Barb, on killing the Demogorgon, on getting shit done.

So Jonathan is left with this. Sure, it's kind of creepy. Before Christmas rolled around Nancy was back with Steve (of course she was). He settles for making supremely polite conversation with her - in shared classes, in the halls, when he picks up Will from the Wheelers. They're not strangers, but they're not friends either. Would it be better or worse if they were friends? He doesn't know.

He's not normal, and he doesn't want to be normal - correct? In the grand scheme, compared to all the weird shit he's done the last few months, jerking off to thoughts of Nancy and him, together, is completely normal. Astoundingly average. Joe Sixpack.

He pictures her: kneeling between his legs while he sits on the edge of his bed; lying on a blanket on the hood of his car; wedged into a corner of the darkroom with her legs wrapped tightly around him - and she's looking at him. Sometimes it's humid and languid. Sometimes it's fast and hard and messy. Sometimes they're dressed and sometimes they're not. Sometimes they're quiet and sometimes they're not. (Would she be? Would he? He doesn't know, he'll never know.)

When it's over, he relaxes into sleep and wakes up in the morning and absolutely does not think about her that way until the next time.

1984 was good for a while. Until June and the weekly funeral

suppers with Barb's parents? Until August and the new school year? Nancy can't pinpoint exactly when the worry (guilt and shame) return; when mid-laugh she hears an acid voice in her head. *You stupid cow. Barb is dead because of you. And here you are, having fun. How dare you.*

She's not sure when Steve's love for her starts to suffocate. When the opposites attract relationship they've built loses its charm, looks instead like a spectacularly bad decision she can't get out of. She's not totally sure when, as she sits with her parents at the breakfast table, instead of automatically reassuring herself *I'll never end up like these sellouts*, she thinks *If I don't make a change, I will definitely end up like these sellouts*.

She realizes – too late, far too late – that Steve wants a Nancy who's satisfied with what little Hawkins has to offer. That Steve doesn't dream of more for himself, let alone her. That Steve wants a Nancy who follows the rules, who doesn't get angry when the fucking government kills her best friend and covers it up. Or does get angry, but then gets over it and goes to watch her boyfriend's basketball game. Because she wants to keep everyone safe.

The Nancy who wants to torch Hawkins Lab and dance madly in its ashes? Who wants to hijack the local radio station and announce to the world just how Barb died, how Will disappeared? The Nancy who wants to blow shit up and see what happens? Steve is scared of that Nancy.

Did Steve's Nancy ever exist? She doesn't think so. She can't remember.

Apparently, she still needs to work on honesty, though, because she says nothing to Steve, to anyone. She admits none of this, not even to herself, until she is shit faced and her doubt and disgust about their relationship spill out of her like she was downing ipecac, not spiked punch, at Tina's party.

(Nancy marches out of the gym with Steve trailing behind her. *He's looking a little sick. Is he hungover?* Her face is rigid with anger. *I did what he asked, went to that stupid party. Now what he does want from me?*

When Steve turns the tables on her, pointing out that she's the asshole, Nancy knows she should feel bad. Mostly, she's confused, like she's lost control of the situation.

She responds in the best (the only) way she knows how: by investigating. Investigating, once again, means seeking out Jonathan.

It's comforting to sit with him on the hood of his car - to feel his gentle concern, not feel his judgment. She's quiet inside, like someone's turned down the heat on the stove and she's at a low simmer, no longer at a rolling boil. She'd like to stay for a while: spread out on the hood like a starfish; bask in the dreamy light of the late autumn sun; admit her head is pounding. She could ask Jonathan to put some music on. *Not too gloomy or loud, though, ok.*

Almost immediately she's distracted by Jason's tape recorder and the spark of an idea. The familiar thrill of doing, not just talking, takes hold.

Nancy is an avenging angel. She wonders if she should find Steve, tell him *Hey, I'm sorry, let's talk later*. She dismisses the idea. *Steve will ask too many questions. Steve will slow me down. Steve won't want to know what I'm up to. Steve will be upset. I don't want to upset him again.* What's important is that everyone at Hawkins Lab pay for what they did to Barb. She'll deal with Steve later.

The new school year begins – Junior year. Two years from now he'll be out of this town. Assuming Will is ok. Assuming mom is ok. Assuming he can keep up his grades. Assuming he can save enough money. Assuming he can get enough scholarship awards and financial aid from a school that isn't, please god please, in the state of Indiana. He doesn't let himself think *New York* because that will jinx it. He doesn't let himself think *that's a lot of assumptions* because it's already hard enough getting out of bed in the morning.

Nancy seems...different. Making eye contact with him more frequently, more deliberately. Stopping by his locker to say hi and ask what's up. Inviting him to a Halloween party. Then Steve is there. (Steve is always there. Does he ever give her some space?) And the moment's over.

Maybe Jonathan is different, too. He doesn't brush off Will's completely reasonable demands with his grown moldy appeasements. *I promised Mom I'd watch out for you. Hey, we just want to be sure you're safe. This won't be forever, just a few more months until you're feeling better.* He gives in. He lets Will go trick or treating by himself, even giving him Bob's expensive video camera. He goes to Tina's Halloween party; sees Nancy and is so distracted - by her ridiculous costume, her punch stained lips, her grinding against Steve - he thinks Samantha's Peter Criss instead of Siouxsie Sioux. Freak cred down the toilet.

When Steve, visibly upset, what the hell happened? asks him to drive Nancy home, *because I'm not ready to leave yet but she clearly needs to*, Jonathan maintains a neutral expression. He sticks his hands in his pockets and shrugs. *Sure, no problem.* Steve snorts. *I bet.* He stalks off, leaving Jonathan to maneuver a pouty, sullen Nancy into his car, where she promptly passes out.

If he thought about it much, which he doesn't, he'd admit it's pretty lame. Nancy is dead to the world. (Is she snoring?) She smells like someone poured a glass of Kool-Aid over her, followed by a bottle of tequila. He has to half carry, half drag her up the stairs - thank god her parents are out - and tuck her into bed in her stinking, sticky clothes. She's so out of it he doesn't think, even if it was a good idea for him to undress her, that he'd be able to, not without tearing her costume in half.

He takes Will home. Will, who's quieter and paler than before. (How is that even possible?) Who says he had a great time and thanks Jonathan for letting him go out on his own. He closes his eyes and rests his head against the window, cutting off any more conversation.

The next day at lunch, Nancy comes to find him, to sit with him on the hood of his car. Jonathan hears himself, even as Nancy says she might not-maybe not-probably doesn't love Steve, reassuring her. *Of*

course you love him! No one means stuff they say when they're drunk! A far-away voice that sounds not dissimilar to his dad sneers. Jesus, what is wrong with you? You could stand up for yourself. But you have to be so helpful all the time. Why don't you offer to get them back together while you're at it?

His brain and his mouth seem to be disconnected. He mumbles the bad guys already got what they deserve. Nancy rightly calls him on that bullshit too.

Then she hears that senior. (Shane? Jeremy?) Then she gets that familiar gleam in her eye, that Nancy Wheeler, "here's a completely insane idea that will probably get us killed" look. His heart leaps. For once his brain and his mouth are in sync, because he hears himself asking *What is it, what are you thinking?*

And they're off to the races.

Nancy tries not to think too much about her plan, whether it'll work and why she's dragging Jonathan into it. The answers are, respectively, *it has to* and *because*.

If this doesn't work, she'll have failed Barb. Again. If this doesn't work, she's putting everyone in danger for no reason. If this doesn't work, maybe Steve's right and she should be content to be the future Mrs. Harrington.

Reasons to ask Jonathan to come along: because acting alone would be stupid, reckless, ill-advised. Not that having a partner doesn't make it these things, just more manageably so. Because she needs someone to drive her. (She really, really needs to suck it up and take driver's ed in the spring.) Because Jonathan has a stake in taking Hawkins Lab down. Because she and Jonathan have done this before, and she can't spare the time to get someone else up to speed. (And who would that someone else be? Mike? Dustin?) Because they need

to move fast, before she loses her nerve.

Proving once again it's what you don't worry about that bites you in the ass, the Lab heist goes smoothly. Ridiculously smoothly, like she and Jonathan do this all the time rather than once, and not very well. It doesn't take much acting on their parts. Jonathan can't stop his leg from beating out a staccato rhythm under the table. Nancy is restless and raging; would throw a chair at the unbelievably smug Dr. Owens except that would defeat the purpose of the entire enterprise.

When he shows off the Gate, like he made it himself, it's legitimately awe inspiring. Perfectly terrifying. Beyond comprehension. Nancy's time in the Upside Down so brief and adrenaline filled she can barely remember what it felt like to be there, let alone – apart from the not-face of the Demogorgon that will haunt her dreams possibly forever - what it looked like. She has a sudden, senseless urge to step into a hazmat suit. Descend into the pulsing, groaning depths. Investigate. See if she can find Jonathan's house. Will's hideout. Steve's swimming pool. Eleven. Barb's body.

She plays the self righteous naïf. *Oh Doctor, please explain to me all you've accomplished and why it's reasonable, wonderful.* Lets herself be escorted to Jonathan's car by a balding, muscle turning to fat dad henchman who shouldn't be menacing, but is. Then they're speeding away. Nancy's heartbeat slows, but for miles her face remains tight, the tendons of her neck like steel rods.

Once they confirm that Dr. Owens' justifications, excuses and unsubtle threats have been recorded, Nancy finally loosens, lets herself smile, even if it's a little grim, a little brittle. For months she's envisioned the Lab scientists as evil masterminds. In the end they turn out to be clueless, cover their ass bureaucrats, with no idea how to fix the giant clusterfuck that's been dumped in their laps. And the Wheelers and Byers are held in such contempt - seen as such hicks, such rubes, such nobodies - no one even bothered to look through her purse.

Her plan might not have been good. But it was good enough.

As they speed out of Hawkins on their way to Murray Bauman's, Nancy's calm enough to remember (to admit) the other reason she

asked Jonathan to come along. Because she's excited, happy, herself when she's monster hunting with him. She's missed this. The easy back and forth they have when no one else is around. How fluidly they develop a strategy, flesh out the details, set a plan in motion. How they can drive, listen to music and not talk. How she can talk and be listened to - not be told *Shhh...We'll get in trouble. It's time to move on. Why did you do that, say that, think that?* No matter what batshit idea pops out of her mouth he looks at her intently, asks questions, offers suggestions. He never says *Nancy, no*.

At the Lab, she notices that she takes the lead while he flanks her. He's ready to back her up if she needs it, but is otherwise silent.

Even when Jonathan's not standing next to her, not looking directly at her, she knows he's completely aware of her. The dissonance, given space while still seen, softens and warms her muscles until they're like stretched taffy. Sometimes, she even looks at him, steadily, without turning away.

Which is maybe why she works up the nerve, as she's lying under scratchy, plastic, don't think too hard about how clean these are motel sheets, to bring up last year. And the limits of their camaraderie, their synchronicity, are brought into stark relief. Because what the fuck is he saying? That she didn't wait long enough for him? That if she sat around for a few more months he'd have had the balls to ask her out? To kiss her? To not hide behind *But Will* and *But Steve*? What complete and total horseshit.

Jonathan doesn't give Nancy a hard time about her "plan." In reality, he should question her more. Because it kind of sucks. Well, it's not that it sucks, so much as it's totally dependent on a lot of people they know nothing about acting in exactly a certain way. Sure, the Demogorgon had been way more likely to kill them than the folks at Hawkins Lab are. That also made it easier to predict.

Before heading over to Radio Shack they do a quick sweep of his car for bugs, and find it's clean. But it's not like either of them are Hopper. They ask Bob to give them his *most state of the art tape recorder*, for an oral history project don't you know. Bob helpfully notes a video camera would *really help you take your work to the next level*. Jonathan smiles thinly in response.

When he gets home, not particularly late, Will's already asleep, mom curled protectively around him. If he thought about it for too long, which he doesn't, he'd wonder if whatever he wasn't around to see that day has him more determined to fuck over those Lab assholes, or more worried he's making a huge mistake, courtesy of his apparently limitless desire to follow Nancy into the breach.

But once they go to the park; once they get picked up by the Lab flunkies; once Nancy goads the doctor into blabbing on and on and on about why the status quo must remain. (Does that guy ever listen to himself?) Once they get into the car and figure out they've got what they came for. Once they're on their way to a bumfuck hamlet in Southern Illinois that makes Hawkins look like Chicago. Then Jonathan finally relaxes a little. Can admit he's enjoying himself, more than a little. He's barely in the last year left the orbit of home to school to work to home. Will and mom will be fine. They've got Hopper. And Bob. He'll only be gone for another day and a half. Nancy needs to do this. He needs to do this. To not keep nodding along in agreement as those Lab assholes tell him, tell mom that Will's pain is simply the unfortunate collateral damage of a mad scientist whose experiments have to be hushed up. *Because you love your country, don't you?* When the only sane response to that is hysterical laughter.

His shoulders drop down. He slouches against his seat, one hand off the steering wheel, tapping his fingers against his thigh as "Confessions" spools to an end.

People worry

What are they worrying about today?

People worry

The interstate miles are endlessly flat, the scenery on either side of the road, as far as the eye can see, a single chord - bristly beige gold

below and watery blue above, melding at the horizon in a thin, white haze. Landscape where each photograph, no matter what angle or f-stop or shutter speed he uses, emerges from the developer identical to the last. Recently harvested corn and soy fields and newly planted fields of winter wheat are punctuated by golden arches, neon shells and cowboy hats, weathered farmhouses and silos - a Cracker Barrel, a Hen House. Small herds of blank faced cattle, stolid in the mud, are kept company by the occasional swaybacked horse. Even through the closed windows he can smell the skunks, the pig farms. It's scenery guaranteed to help him doze off and wind up under the wheels of a passing semi if he stops thinking about it. Which he doesn't.

Nancy rests her socked feet on the dashboard. She munches on curly fries and a chicken sandwich; reads *Bright Lights, Big City* because *there's no way I can concentrate on Shakespeare right now*. She gasps, giggles and snorts; reads aloud the most over the top passages (he laughs at the ferret).

See, Jonathan, this is what happens when you abandon the wholesome, god fearing, family loving Midwest for the atheists and literary magazine readers and drug and sex addicts of New York City. Debt! Despair! Debilitating depression!

Don't forget dancing. Dancing to shitty club music. That might be the worst.

The sky darkens, the highway narrows to two lanes, the traffic drops off. A low hanging quarter moon, his headlights and intermittent flare stacks are all that illuminate the road ahead.

When she asks him at the motel *what happened to us?* maybe Jonathan is *too* relaxed. He says exactly what he's thinking. She is, predictably, outraged. He is...exhausted. For a moment he let himself forget that talking about monster hunting and talking about Nancy and Jonathan are completely different.

After he turns off the light he rolls over. He ignores her angry back, knowing he'll be asleep in a few minutes. He feels a sour glimmer of satisfaction that she'll probably be up for hours, stewing over what he said.

The next morning, they pretend their conversation (their fight) didn't happen. Jonathan's shoulders are hunched, his expression flat. Nancy notices, but she's got bigger worries.

Murray is utterly, completely not what she expected. After the initial shock wears off, Nancy decides she likes him. Yes, he's paranoid, with a huge chip on his shoulder. He's far too pleased with his cultivated lack of social skills. Unlike Chief Hopper, though, he talks to her as an equal, not as a kid who always needs to be protected from the big, bad world. Unlike Chief Hopper, he's not invested in keeping everyone *safe* (in keeping them stupid).

They figure out how to make the recording more digestible for John Q. Public, and Nancy is giddy. The generous slosh of vodka and soda Murray hands her has her dancing, if only in her head. As they set up the tapes and pack the envelopes they're quiet, lulled into silence by the afternoon booze, the repetitiveness of the task and Murray's endless supply of jazz records. She passes an envelope to Jonathan and their hands brush. Nancy glows. Is satisfied. At peace.

Just as she thinks it's time to pack it in and get some sleep, Murray stumbles across another curtain that needs to be pulled back.

Jonathan says *Steve*, and Nancy's stomach tightens. She hasn't thought about him since she and Jonathan skipped fourth period – two and half days ago. She tries to defend herself, but isn't fooling anyone anymore. Murray dismisses her affirmations of love. Nancy discovers she has no words left.

Murray marches off to bed, leaving Jonathan and her to sit there, not looking at each other. He snags the extra vodka Murray poured her and downs it in one gulp.

Nance, we should leave early tomorrow? I'll take the study.

She nods vigorously, and they go their separate ways. She changes

into her cozy pink nightgown, brushes her teeth, and flops on the squeaky, too thin mattress.

Retreat? I don't retreat.

She doesn't love Steve. They might already have broken up. That doesn't mean she needs to jump into bed with Jonathan, before the body's even cold (before she's even pulled the plug). They can be friends. Just friends. Friends who fight monsters of all kinds together. Friends who are linked by their knowledge of what's really out there. Friends who are attracted to each other, sure, but who put their friendship first. That's not retreat. That's understanding their relationship as it stands is a good one, and they shouldn't mess it up.

Nancy can admit she's been giving some...mixed messages to Jonathan recently. Murray's ramblings haven't helped the situation. She should talk to Jonathan before he goes to sleep, see if they're on the same page. It wouldn't be healthy, for their friendship, for them to spend a second night in a row with awkwardness between them.

The next morning, they pretend last night didn't happen. Jonathan tries to say *Ready to do this?* with some enthusiasm. To be honest, he just wants it done. He's getting antsy, being away from Will for this long. Nancy's donned her determined, ready-for-battle face. He can hear the excitement buzzing just under her skin.

He hasn't given much thought to what Murray would be like. Even if he had, he wouldn't - couldn't - have imagined this dirty looking guy in a dirtier looking bathrobe and slippers who's watched *The Parallax View* one too many times. *It's 10:40 on a Thursday* he mutters to Nancy soon after they arrive, *why isn't he dressed yet?*

Jonathan can't say he likes Murray. His delusions of grandeur and self satisfaction get pretty boring, pretty fast. But Murray quickly figures out how to use the recording, and Nancy's thrilled.

He's happy Nancy's one giant step closer to getting some closure. Maybe this will provide some closure for him, too. He's less certain about this than he was a couple of days ago.

As they prepare the tapes and envelopes Jonathan thinks about what's to come. It seems like the longest of long shots that any reputable paper will believe them. He doesn't know why Murray is confident their plan will work. Nancy's optimistic too. She's started to debate with him whether they should confess to folks back home what they've done. With all the NDAs that have been signed, it's probably better to keep quiet, not put themselves - their families - in a compromising position. They should, he suggests, let Murray take all the credit. Nancy is understandably annoyed by this argument, grumbling *Not you too, worried about being safe*, an unspoken *like Steve* hanging between them.

Jonathan counts to five. He squashes the impulse to return harmless snark with verbal annihilation. Explains softly that he and mom have taken cash from the government in exchange for silence. Not a lot of cash, but enough to fix the house. A compromise that means he's a disgusting hypocrite, but also a pragmatic one without a gaping hole by his front door and carpets that smell like gasoline. He'd, therefore, prefer to stay out of it. For two blinks of an eye Nancy looks embarrassed, never having to worry about money unless her mom tries to dock her allowance. Then she nods and changes the subject.

The whole discussion is moot. If someone bites, follows up with Murray, it'll all come out. Jonathan fully aware of this possibility back in Hawkins, as soon as he heard Nancy's plan. He keeps these thoughts to himself. There's a fine line between comrade-in-arms, always willing to follow Nancy into the breach, and lovesick fool gambling with his family's well being.

He needs to not think about this. Luckily, Murray wants to distract him with some final drunken wisdom.

Jonathan's annoyed by Murray's shallow armchair psychoanalysis. But not as much as he should be. Perhaps it's the vodka. Perhaps it's the satisfaction of having someone call Nancy (call him) on their bullshit, but Jonathan is mostly...relieved. He also feels like a complete idiot, sitting on the couch inches away from Nancy,

wordlessly demanding that she *look at him, damn it* while she looks everywhere else.

He downs her drink, retreats to his room with a mumbled excuse. And thinks. For once, he's letting himself (forcing himself to) think about it. He lets the door of that usually locked room, the place he stores every wonderful, terrible, only in his dreams Nancy related item, open a little. And a little more.

Trust issues

Daddy issues. How trite. How cliché. How...stupid of him not to see it before?

Trust issues

He can't claim he's one of the only people in Hawkins capable of independent thought if he's still letting that jackass control his behavior.

And what about Steve?

Fuck Steve. He had his chance. He blew it.

He freezes when he sees Nancy outside her room. And it happens. Again. He babbles, denies, equivocates, prevaricates. Even as his brain screams *If you can't say what you're really thinking, shut the fuck up!*

Jonathan retreats. (He's always retreating. He's good at it. He learned from the best.) He throws himself on the bed, turns off the light. Wants to punch himself in the face. Repeatedly.

She can't go home with this unresolved tension between them. Her life will never go back to the way it was. That's ok. She's ready for what comes next.

He is going to kiss her. He is not going to say anything. He is going to kiss her. He is not going to say anything. He is going to kiss her.

Author's Note:

"Confessions" is from the Violent Femmes self-titled 1983 debut. If you haven't listened to the album, you should. :)